

The Spokane River Forum is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that creates materials, events and activities that promote sustaining a healthy river system while meeting the needs of a growing population.

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Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) set to give conservation a boost

Last fall, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, awarded \$7.7 million of funding over 5 years to help agricultural producers and private forest landowners within the Spokane River Basin (nearly 4 million acres in Washington and Idaho).

Led by the Spokane Conservation District, an advisory committee has reviewed the first 54 applications from Washington and Idaho. 23 contracts are being prepared with land owners to put conservation efforts on the ground as early as this spring.

Said Charlie Peterson, the Spokane Conservation District RCPP Manager, "Land owners are agreeing to use best management practices and share in the costs. The development and approval of proposals is a rigorous process to make sure we're getting effective, sustainable results for both the farmer and the environment."

First year funding highlights include:

- 22,000 acres of crops will be converted to conservation tillage practices, (no-till or reduced-till). These farming practices have the twin benefits of improving soil health and reducing erosion. And with less erosion comes improved water quality by reducing sediment loads in our streams and rivers.
- 6,600 acres of crops adopting precision agriculture practices. Here, farmers go high tech with GPS, satellite technology and advanced software to be far more precise about the amount, timing and location of practices such as applying fertilizer. Minimizing inputs supports environmental protection while also reducing farm expenses.
- 100 forest acres in Idaho will receive thinning and pruning, which will contribute to their health and reduce fire risks.
- 40-50 miles of commodity buffers. This innovative approach (which is being supported with additional WA Conservation Commission funding) compensates farmers for taking out some of their most productive lands adjacent to waterways and

replacing them with buffers, which are generally grass filter strips. By doing this, water quality and habitat are improved by keeping soil and nutrients in the fields and out of the water.

"The types of practices farmers are converting to," said Peterson, "often require significant capital investments and the courage to do things a bit differently. RCPP provides the incentives and support to make these transitions."

Said Walt Edelen, the Water Resources Manager for the Spokane Conservation District, "Although nonpoint source pollution has many sources, RCPP allows us to focus on reducing contributions from agriculture. Urban and suburban residents will see the benefits of improved fish habitat and reduced algae blooms as far downstream as Lake Spokane."

Distribution of activities in Washington roughly falls into the following areas: 43% of acres in Hangman Creek, 25% in the Little Spokane, 41% in the West Plains and 7% in Deadman Creek. Landowners will have up to three years to fully implement the projects.



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